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Tracking The Future of Our HBCUs - Part Two

By Rosaland Tyler

From 1960 until today, one historically black college or university has closed its campus about every two years.

At their peak, in the 1940s, HBCUs numbered 240, records show. While some were more like high schools than rigorous colleges about half of these schools reinvented themselves during the Reconstruction era, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights era. Now, extensive makeovers are underway as the Great Recession continues.

Launched to train the some of the nation’s poorest citizens, HBCUs are similar and yet unique. For example, Washington Monthly ranked about a dozen of the current 103 HBCUs as Dropout Factories in 2010. Meanwhile, Forbes included 16 HBCUs on its list of Top Colleges of 2013, which included the name of Hampton University.

"Let's get on with it," Dr. William Harvey said breaking ground for the Hampton University Therapy Institute in 2007. Although Harvey was talking about the new cancer treatment center at the university, which is one of only five proton centers nationwide, he could have been describing the school’s ongoing efforts to invent itself.

Black and white leaders of the American Missionary Association established Hampton in 1868, which was about three years after the Civil War ended. Initially providing education to African Americans, the university opened its classrooms to Native Americans about a decade later in 1878. The school's ongoing transformation is graphically clear in the Hampton University Museum which was founded the year Hampton opened its doors. More than 8 million documents and more than 50,000 images tell the university’s story.

Millions of artifacts and thousands of photographs describe the Native American program.

“You might ask yourself, why is it so important to bring proton beam therapy to Virginia at this time,” Harvey said in his 2007 keynote address which is on the school’s website. “Let me give you the facts and then I hope you can see why I believe everybody in Virginia ought to be as passionate about helping with this venture as I am.”

“According to the Centers for Disease Control and the National Cancer Institute, one out of every three Virginians will develop some form of cancer during his or her lifetime,” Harvey explained. “Did you hear what I said? One out of three Virginians will develop cancer. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in Virginia. Hampton Roads leads the nation in prostate cancer deaths. Chesapeake, Va. ranks number one when compared to other cities in colon cancer deaths.”

“The proton cancer treatment center is unparalleled in Virginia and will not compete with, but compliment other cancer centers in the state. It provides all of our citizens-black and white, young and old, men and women, another modality in fighting that dreaded disease cancer,” Harvey said.
If Hampton made headlines for healing people, Howard University made headlines five years later for making some people feel ill.

Howard University, one of 16 HBCUs listed on the 2013 Forbes list, made headlines last year after it gave a handful of top administrators pay bonuses that amounted to more than $1 million. The payments were made at a time when tuition hikes were enacted and furloughs were being considered. A year later, a Howard University trustee said the school could end up closing its doors in three years for mismanagement and financial problems.

“Howard will not be here in three years if we don’t make some crucial decisions now,” said Renee Higginbotham-Brooks, vice chairwoman of Howard University’s board of trustees, in an April 24 letter the Washington Post reported.

Of the letter, Chairman Addison Barry Rand later said it lacked context and painted an “unduly alarming picture of the university’s condition.”

The alarming letter from Howard’s board vice chair actually dated back to a letter faculty senate leaders had written a year earlier. Faculty Senate leaders questioned the decision to award controversial pay bonuses to top administrators. They protested the pay bonuses that ranged from $97,006 to $522,184. The bonuses were awarded in 2010 and disclosed on Internal Revenue Service forms, Inside Higher Education reported on Feb. 29, 2012.

The three largest bonuses were negotiated in 2007 just before Dr. Sidney Ribeau was hired as Howard’s new president. “No such bonuses were awarded in 2009,” Inside Higher Education reported.

Individual bonuses amounted to a high of $224,050 for the general counsel to a low of $97,006 for the director of the cancer center at Howard’s hospital. “While those awards might raise eyebrows in even the sunniest budget years, the fact is they came just before the college slashed its degree offerings and announced a 12 percent undergraduate tuition hike,” Inside Higher Education continued.

“Just three days before the faculty senate leaders sent their letter, Ribeau wrote an open letter to the university community saying the university’s expenses exceeded its revenues during the first half of the fiscal year,” Inside Higher Education continued. “He outlined several steps to save money, including closing buildings over spring break. Ribeau also called for the consideration of furloughs for faculty and staff members, including administrators. Senior administrators would be asked to take the most furlough days, he wrote.”

The senate leaders wrote, “We find this to be morally repugnant for the university to award very large sums of additional university monies when our endowment, our federal subsidy and the university’s operating budget have decreased significantly.”

It’s not exactly a new story. For example, Meharry Medical Center arose like a phoenix from the ashes of several historically black colleges and universities in Nashville. As the mythical phoenix obtains new life by arising from the ashes of its predecessor, Meharry gained traction as Walden University died.

Walden University began its life in 1900 as Central Tennessee College in 1900. The name was changed to Walden University. Walden thrived but finally closed its doors after operating from 1865 to 1925. Ironically, Walden was forced to close because students were flocking to Tennessee Agricultural, Industrial, and Normal State School, an HBCU which opened in 1912.
So Meharry Medical College, which had initially been one of Walden’s departments in 1876, as well as the first medical school in the South for African Americans, moved forward. It was separately chartered as a separate institution in 1915. It is one of only a few historically black medical schools in the United States.

Walden University encountered problems attracting students and struggled to reframe its mission. Meanwhile, lynchings and mistreatment pushed many African Americans to leave Nashville and to head North during the Great Migration. Nashville’s black population dropped sharply from 40 percent in 1890, according to census data. By the 1970s, only 22 percent of the city was black.

Currently, Meharry is struggling like many HBCUs. Meharry named a new president this month, Dr. Cherrie Epps, 83, who replaces Dr. Wayne Riley. He chose not return after taking a sabbatical in May, according to news reports.

Epps takes the helm when the college is scheduled for a 2013-14 survey by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, the accrediting body for medical schools.

It is also facing federal lawsuits that allege religious and ethnic discrimination. Its hospital is admitting fewer patients, only 11 a day who are increasingly unable to pay for their care, according to a report by the Metro Nashville Hospital Authority a year ago, according to news reports.

But, the outgoing president, Riley challenged the Atlanta-based report, commissioned another study to look at the hospital’s operations, and explored partnerships with other hospitals. He opposed ending inpatient services at Nashville General. But for reasons never revealed, he took a sabbatical and resigned, according to news reports.

The new president, a former interim president with more than two dozen years of experience at the medical school, has a Ph.D. in zoology from Howard University. She has published articles in The New England Journal of Medicine, The Lancet and the Journal of the National Medical Association. She has worked at Meharry since 1994.

The new president is also overseeing the accreditation process, construction projects, as well as ongoing conversations on Nashville General Hospital. “Meharry Medical College continues to flourish and grow under Dr. Epps’ leadership,” said Janet M. Caldwell, associate vice president for communications and marketing at Meharry. “Change is inevitable in any organization, including institutions of higher learning like Meharry. It contributes to growth, new ideas and innovation.”